

Briefing delivered to the Counter-Kleptocracy Caucus

Serbia's Upcoming Elections

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Rep. Wilson, distinguished members, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, thank you for the opportunity to brief this panel on the state of democracy in Serbia and the growing threat of foreign interference in the country's electoral and political processes.

Serbia is approaching a critical electoral moment on October 25. The integrity of this election will have consequences far beyond the outcome of a single vote. It will be a test of whether Serbian citizens can exercise their democratic rights free from coercion, intimidation, and foreign efforts to influence their political choices.

Serbia's democratic resilience is closely connected to its sovereignty, its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and the broader security of the region.

My briefing today will examine the risks facing Serbia's electoral process, including Russian, Chinese, and Iranian interference, and the steps the United States can take to help protect Serbia's institutions and the ability of Serbian citizens to determine their own political future.

Democratic Backsliding in Serbia

Serbia's democratic freedoms have declined under the leadership of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Aleksandar Vučić. Multiple nongovernmental organizations have warned about a weakening of electoral integrity, press freedom, and rule of law as political polarization increases.

Both the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) and Freedom House report a reduction in democratic freedoms in the country. This year, BTI, which assesses transitions toward constitutional democracy, scored Serbia a 5.2 out of 10 on its democracy status, down from 6.1 two years ago.¹ This puts Serbia in a category of "moderate autocracies." Also this year, Freedom House reduced Serbia's political and civil freedoms score from 56 to 53 out of 100, citing violence against anti-government protests and threats against independent media.² The European Commission, in its 2025 Serbia report, warned that Vučić's control over the country's Parliament as well as other parliamentary issues is resulting in a "lack of genuine political debate" and low levels of public scrutiny on legislative functions.³

Elections are becoming less free and fair. During the last presidential elections in April 2022, the government engaged in "systematic disregard, misuse and selective enforcement of laws and rules," according to CIVICUS Lens, the commentary branch of global civil society alliance CIVICUS.⁴ The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Freedom House, CIVICUS, and other observers noted that media

¹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, "Transformation Atlas: Serbia," 2026. (https://atlas.bti-project.org/1*2026*CV:CTC:SELSRB*CAT*SRB*REG:TAB)

² Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2026: Serbia," 2026. (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2026>)

³ European Commission, "Serbia 2025 Report," April 11, 2025. (https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6e68ce26-b95b-48e1-921a-c60c12da8f00_en?filename=serbia-report-2025.pdf)

⁴ Rasa Nedeljkov, "Serbia: 'We are becoming an electoral autocracy, a system where the government cannot lose,'" *CIVICUS Lens*, July 15, 2026. (<https://lens.civicus.org/interview/serbia-we-are-becoming-an-electoral-autocracy-a-system-where-the-government-cannot-lose>)

coverage, pressure on voters, forms of political clientelism, and abuse of government resources provided an advantage to SNS candidates.⁵

This is a pattern of behavior. The SNS frequently pressures media, opposition groups and individuals, and civil society organizations.⁶ BTI and the European Commission both claim that smear campaigns and strategic lawsuits against public participation have reduced freedom of expression.⁷ The government has prohibited representatives of civil society organizations from entering or remaining in Serbia.⁸ In February 2025, Serbian police raided four offices, including CIVICUS, and state media accused them of working on behalf of foreign actors.⁹

State ownership or control over many media companies and media regulatory institutions allows the regime to filter what content is released.¹⁰ For example, the satellite television service EON SAT banned two independent media channels which Vučić labeled as participating in “terrorism.”¹¹

Using its control over media-related entities, the government spreads propaganda that further inflames political polarization by villainizing the party’s opposition.¹² After a railway station canopy collapsed in November 2024, Serbian citizens blamed government corruption and began a series of protests. The movement quickly evolved to pose direct political challenge to Vučić and remains ongoing today. State propaganda, however, claims that the protesters are the result of foreign interference.¹³

State forces also respond with violence, possibly including sonic weapons, according to the European Commission.¹⁴ Vučić’s regime uses spyware to monitor critics, protesters, and journalists. Serbian authorities reportedly used NoviSpy software and Cellebrite forensic

⁵ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2026: Serbia,” 2026. (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2026>); Rasa Nedeljkov, “SERBIA: ‘We are becoming an electoral autocracy, a system where the government cannot lose,’” *CIVICUS Lens*, July 15, 2026. (<https://lens.civicus.org/interview/serbia-we-are-becoming-an-electoral-autocracy-a-system-where-the-government-cannot-lose>); Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “Republic of Serbia: Presidential and Early Parliamentary Elections, 3 April 2022,” August 19, 2022. (http://odihr.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/0/0/524385_0.pdf)

⁶ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2026: Serbia,” 2026. (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2026>)

⁷ European Commission, “Serbia 2025 Report,” April 11, 2025. (https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6e68ce26-b95b-48e1-921a-c60c12da8f00_en?filename=serbia-report-2025.pdf); Bertelsmann Stiftung, “Serbia,” 2026. (<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SRB>)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.; Rasa Nedeljkov, “SERBIA: ‘We are becoming an electoral autocracy, a system where the government cannot lose,’” *CIVICUS Lens*, July 15, 2026. (<https://lens.civicus.org/interview/serbia-we-are-becoming-an-electoral-autocracy-a-system-where-the-government-cannot-lose>)

¹⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, “Serbia,” 2026. (<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SRB>)

¹¹ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2026: Serbia,” 2026. (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2026>)

¹² Bertelsmann Stiftung, “Serbia,” 2026. (<https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SRB>)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ European Commission, “Serbia 2025 Report,” April 11, 2025. (https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6e68ce26-b95b-48e1-921a-c60c12da8f00_en?filename=serbia-report-2025.pdf)

extraction to gain access into the devices of journalists and activists, according to a 2024 Amnesty International report.¹⁵ This year, there were at least 14 cases of a similar spyware targeting Serbians, including members of the student movement engaged in protests.¹⁶

The government is also complicit in violence conducted by nonstate actors.¹⁷ According to Freedom House, individuals connected to the opposition and protest movements face attacks from nonstate actors.¹⁸ Vučić, however, has pardoned many of those accused of this criminal behavior.¹⁹

A former information minister under Milošević, Vučić has yet to shed aggressive nationalist aspirations. In September, his government buried war criminal Ratko Mladić, also known as the “Butcher of Bosnia,” with military honors.²⁰

Cozying up to U.S. Adversaries

While leading the country farther away from democracy, the current Serbian government is welcoming cooperation with U.S. adversaries. Serbia relies heavily on Russian energy and maintains deep security and intelligence cooperation with Russia. Meanwhile, Belgrade is building economic, defense, and technological ties with China and diplomatic ties with Iran.

RUSSIA

Despite President Aleksandar Vučić’s flirtations with closer ties to Europe, the country remains deeply tied to Russia — dependent on Moscow for energy, defense, and intelligence support. Last month, Serbia hosted the first official visit by a Ukrainian president, but this outreach does not amount to a strategic break with Russia. Serbia continues to reject sanctions against Moscow and deepen institutional ties with Russia.

Energy affords Moscow leverage over Belgrade. The most significant example is Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), in which Russia’s Gazprom Neft has held a controlling stake. Within

¹⁵ “Serbia: Authorities using spyware and Cellebrite forensic extraction tools to hack journalists and activists,” *Amnesty International*, December 16, 2024. (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/serbia-authorities-using-spyware-and-cellebrite-forensic-extraction-tools-to-hack-journalists-and-activists>)

¹⁶ Aisha Down, “Serbians targeted with spyware in country’s ‘largest documented wave of surveillance,’” *The Guardian* (UK), September 3, 2026. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/sep/03/serbians-targeted-with-advanced-spyware>)

¹⁷ European Commission, “Serbia 2025 Report,” April 11, 2025. (https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6e68ce26-b95b-48e1-921a-c60c12da8f00_en?filename=serbia-report-2025.pdf)

¹⁸ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2026: Serbia,” 2026. (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2026>)

¹⁹ European Commission, “Serbia 2025 Report,” April 11, 2025. (https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6e68ce26-b95b-48e1-921a-c60c12da8f00_en?filename=serbia-report-2025.pdf)

²⁰ Dusan Stojanovic and Jovana Gec, “War criminal Mladic is buried as a hero in Serbia despite EU warnings,” *Associated Press*, September 7, 2026. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/09/07/serbia-mladic-funeral-war-crimes-genocide-burial/87b94798-aa8c-11f1-b498-8697f35a6743_story.html)

Serbia, NIS accounts for 80 percent of the domestic fuel market,²¹ giving Moscow influence over a significant portion of Serbia's energy infrastructure. Washington's decision to sanction Gazprom Neft in January 2025 increased pressure on Belgrade to restructure Russian ownership and reduce its exposure to Moscow. Rather than pursuing an immediate break, however, Vučić has negotiated waivers to allow NIS to operate while a sale is finalized.²² U.S. waivers acknowledge the inherently slow selling process and preserve energy stability, but they also help Vučić avoid picking a side between Russia and the United States.

Intelligence cooperation between Serbia and Russia is particularly pernicious. Last year, in March, in a meeting with Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu, then-Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin described Russian intelligence assistance to Serbian authorities as important in countering what Belgrade portrayed as a potential "color revolution."²³ Serbia subsequently asked Russia's FSB to examine allegations that it had used a sound cannon against demonstrators.²⁴ To no one's surprise, Russia exonerated Serbia, even as independent acoustic analysis reached a different conclusion. Moreover, Politico reported that Serbian intelligence actually tested sound cannons on dogs in collaboration with Russia's FSB.²⁵

Serbia has been implicated in Russia's attempts to train paramilitary forces to destabilize its neighbors. In September 2025, Moldovan authorities detained 74 people for allegedly receiving tactical training in Serbia.²⁶ France sentenced three Serbian nationals in December 2025 over a Kremlin-linked operation to place pig heads outside mosques in the Paris region.²⁷ Former Western special forces personnel allegedly used Serbian territory to train Russian operatives to fight in Ukraine.²⁸

²¹ Marta Szpala, "US sanctions targeting Russian energy assets in Serbia," *Centre for Eastern Studies*, January 15, 2025. (<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-01-15/us-sanctions-targeting-russian-energy-assets-serbia>)

²² "Serbia secures further sanctions waiver Russian owned NIS oil firm," *Reuters*, August 28, 2026. (<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/serbia-secures-further-sanctions-waiver-russian-owned-nis-oil-firm-2026-08-28>)

²³ "Top Russian security official, Serbian deputy PM discuss protests in Serbia, agencies say," *Reuters*, March 22, 2025. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/top-russian-security-official-serbian-deputy-pm-discuss-protests-serbia-agencies-2025-03-22>)

²⁴ "Serbia Says Russian Intel Report Found No 'Sound Cannon' Used on Protesters," *Agence France-Presse* (France), April 17, 2025. (<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/04/17/serbia-says-russian-intel-report-found-no-sound-cannon-used-on-protesters-a88761>)

²⁵ Una Hajdari, "Serbia let Putin's spies zap dogs with 'sound cannons,'" *Politico*, January 15, 2026. (<https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-vladimir-putin-documents-intelligence-lrad>)

²⁶ "Moldova detains 74 people over an alleged Russia-backed unrest plot around key election," *Associated Press*, September 22, 2025. (<https://apnews.com/article/moldova-russia-arrests-plot-election-293ee902e878ce1efcca339759eb06d0>)

²⁷ Jean-Baptiste Chastand, "Serbia emerges as main hub for Russian destabilization operations in Europe," *Le Monde* (France), March 17, 2026. (https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2026/03/17/serbia-emerges-as-main-hub-for-russian-destabilization-operations-in-europe_6751510_4.html)

²⁸ Tony Diver and Tom Cotterill, "Exclusive: SAS veterans 'training Russians to fight in Ukraine,'" *The Telegraph* (UK), September 9, 2026. (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2026/09/09/sas-veterans-training-russians-kill-ukrainian-leaked-report>)

Serbia has also granted passports to alleged Russian intelligence operatives.²⁹ The suspected Russian spy behind the drone attack in Leipzig, Germany, departed from Leipzig/Halle Airport for Serbia and has since returned to Russia.³⁰

Russia also operates the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš. While the organization's mission is officially emergency response and humanitarian assistance, U.S. officials believe it has intelligence and security functions.³¹

CHINA

While energy and intelligence are hallmarks of Serbia's relationship with Russia, Belgrade's growing ties with China feature investment, arms sales, and technology transfer. Chinese President Xi Jinping awarded Vučić the Order of Friendship, one of China's highest honors for foreign citizens, during the Serbian president's official visit in May.³²

Chinese investments in Serbia are frequently made under the umbrella of China's Belt and Road Initiative. These investments include critical infrastructure projects, such as the Belgrade-Budapest railway, as well as acquisitions in critical sectors such as energy. China is involved in various industries, including steel and tire production and mineral extraction. These investments pose real dangers not only to U.S. interests in the region but also to the safety of Serbian citizens. The railway station canopy that collapsed in 2024, killing 16 people, was a flagship government project carried out by Chinese companies. The disaster shocked the public, fueled allegations that corruption had led to substandard construction, and sparked nationwide protests.

Over the past few years, China and Serbia have expanded their security cooperation, signaling Serbia's growing role as one of Beijing's closest European partners. Serbia was the first European country to purchase Chinese CH-92A drones in 2020, and two years later, Belgrade purchased Chinese FK-3 air-defense systems.³³ In July 2025, the two countries held a joint military exercise, dubbed Peace Guardian 2025, and agreed to deepen collaboration on air-defense systems, drones, and advanced military technologies.³⁴ In March, Serbia confirmed the

²⁹ Ljudmila Cvetkovic and Jovana Krstic, "Serbia Fast-Tracks Citizenship For Russians, Despite EU Concerns," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 11, 2026. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-passports-citizenship-sanctioned-russians/33778410.html>)

³⁰ Alexander Dinger, Ibrahim Naber, and Lennart Pfahler, "Suspected Russian spy behind drone attack in Leipzig," *Politico*, September 13, 2026. (<https://www.politico.eu/article/suspect-russia-spy-drone-attack-in-leipzig-halle-airport-germany>)

³¹ Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, Minority Staff, "Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security," January 10, 2018. (https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SPrt_115-21.pdf)

³² Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Swiss Confederation, "President Vučić Awarded the Order of Friendship of the People's Republic of China," May 26, 2026. (<https://berne.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/activities/president-vucic-awarded-order-friendship-peoples-republic-china>)

³³ Sebastien Roblin, "Missile-Armed Chinese Drones Arrive In Europe As Serbia Seeks Airpower Edge," *Forbes*, July 9, 2020. (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastienroblin/2020/07/09/missile-armed-chinese-drones-arrive-in-europe-for-serbian-military>); "NATO-partner Serbia admits buying Chinese missiles after photos leaked," *Reuters*, March 13, 2026. (<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/nato-partner-serbia-admits-buying-chinese-missiles-after-photos-leaked-2026-03-13>)

³⁴ Ryan Chan, "Chinese Special Forces Train With New Ally in Europe," *Newsweek*, July 30, 2025. (<https://www.newsweek.com/chinese-special-forces-train-new-ally-serbia-2106264>)

acquisition of Chinese CM-400AKG air-to-surface ballistic missiles, which Serbia has integrated onto its Soviet-era Mikoyan MiG-29 jets.³⁵ Last month, the two countries held the second meeting of their bilateral Subcommittee for Cooperation on Military Matters in Belgrade.³⁶ Beyond the military, Chinese technology is aiding Vučić's rollback of democratic freedoms. Vučić's government is using camera equipment from Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei to conduct surveillance in Serbia's three largest cities.³⁷ Vučić and Xi have also announced plans for an "intergovernmental technology committee" to expand Serbia's access to AI and other advanced technologies while granting Beijing an enhanced security foothold in Europe.

IRAN

Over the past few years, relations between Belgrade and Tehran have grown warmer. In a July 2024 meeting, then-Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin and Iranian President Masud Pezeshkian emphasized their countries' "sincere friendship."³⁸ Later that year, in November, Minister of Internal Affairs Ivica Dačić suggested that Iran's ambassador had greatly improved relationships between the countries, particularly on police cooperation.³⁹

The two have announced plans to expand technology cooperation. In February 2025, Iran and Serbia agreed on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Cooperation in the Field of Information and Communication Technologies.⁴⁰ The MOU expands cooperation on technological developments including artificial intelligence. During a July 2026 trip to Iran, Serbian Minister of Information and Telecommunications Boris Bratina met with Iran's minister of information and communications technology to plan its implementation.⁴¹

Serbia's attempts to play both Iran and the West, however, are becoming increasingly untenable. In February, Vučić's rhetoric compared U.S. strikes on Iran to those in Serbia in 1999.⁴² He initially tried to maintain neutrality and was slow to align with the European Union's efforts to designate Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization, although he

³⁵ "NATO-partner Serbia admits buying Chinese missiles after photos leaked," *Reuters*, March 13, 2026.

(<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/nato-partner-serbia-admits-buying-chinese-missiles-after-photos-leaked-2026-03-13>)

³⁶ Republic of Serbia Ministry of Defence, "Second meeting of Subcommittee for Cooperation on Military Matters held," August 14, 2026. (<https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/23534/odrzano-drugo-zasedanje-pododbora-za-saradnju-po-vojnim-pitanjima>)

³⁷ Jelena Jankovic and Reid Standish, "Leaked Files Reveal Serbia's Secret Expansion Of Chinese-Made Surveillance," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 13, 2025. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/exclusive-safe-city-china-surveillance-huawei-facial-recognition/33501155.html>)

³⁸ The Government of the Republic of Serbia, "Potential for developing cooperation with Iran in various fields," July 31, 2024. (<http://srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/227866/potential-for-developing-cooperation-with-iran-in-various-fields.php>)

³⁹ The Government of the Republic of Serbia, "Bilateral relations between Serbia, Iran significantly improved," November 18, 2024. (<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/236992/bilateral-relations-between-serbia-iran-significantly-improved.php>)

⁴⁰ The Government of the Republic of Serbia, "Memorandum of cooperation in ICT signed with Iran," February 27, 2025. (<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/244309/memorandum-of-cooperation-in-ict-signed-with-iran.php>)

⁴¹ Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Information and Communications Technology, "Iranian, Serbian ICT ministers stress implementation of cooperation MoU," July 4, 2026. (<https://www.ict.gov.ir/en/news/167025/Iranian-Serbian-ICT-ministers-stress-implementation-of-cooperation-MoU>)

⁴² Teodora Encheva, "Vucic: Middle East Conflict Marks End of Respect for International Law, not WWII," *Bulgarian News Agency* (Bulgaria), February 28, 2026 (<https://www.bta.bg/en/news/balkans/1074449-vucic-middle-east-conflict-marks-end-of-respect-for-international-law-not-wwii>)

ultimately did so.⁴³ In early July 2026, however, Serbia sent a delegation to convey condolences and attend the funeral of former Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.⁴⁴ During the trip, Minister Bratina met with Iran's foreign minister to express "solidarity" over Iranian leaders and others who have died in the war.⁴⁵

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

I want to applaud the leaders of this caucus for sponsoring the Supporting the Rule of law, Building Institutional Justice, and Accountability Act or SRBIJA Act. This bill draws needed attention to the democratic backsliding and corruption in Serbia and recognizes that Serbia's strategic orientation and positions on regional stability run counter to U.S. interests.

Washington should use financial sanctions and visa restrictions against individuals responsible for corruption, attacks on democratic institutions, political violence, or actions that undermine regional stability.

The United States should counter Russian, Chinese, and Iranian influence in Serbia, particularly in energy, critical infrastructure, telecommunications, finance, and political networks. Serbia's position outside the EU sanctions regime, combined with its customs arrangements and its arms industry, has made it a useful transit point for procurement and re-export schemes, and U.S. policy should treat it as such.

For example, the United States should end sanctions waivers for NIS and stop providing exemptions that allow Serbia to maintain continued Russian involvement in its energy sector. Washington should require the full removal of Russian ownership and control of NIS and support Serbia in securing alternative energy supplies.

The Treasury and Commerce Departments should systematically map the front companies, trading intermediaries, freight forwarders, and financial institutions operating in and through Serbia that facilitate the movement of controlled goods, dual-use technology, and restricted munitions components to Russia and Iran.

Treasury should designate the responsible entities under existing authorities and make clear to Serbian banks and logistics firms in particular that if they are knowingly processing this trade, they will face secondary sanctions exposure.

Pressure alone will not produce a durable shift in Belgrade's orientation. Serbia needs a visible alternative to what Moscow and Beijing offer, and the United States should describe that alternative in concrete terms.

⁴³ "Western Balkan countries split between neutrality and the support to USA," *European Western Balkans*, March 17, 2026. (<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/03/17/western-balkan-countries-split-between-neutrality-and-the-support-to-usa>)

⁴⁴ Finya Swai, "Iran welcomes foreign leaders for Ayatollah Khamenei's state funeral," *The Hill*, July 3, 2026. (<https://thehill.com/policy/international/5952738-ayatollah-khamenei-funeral-tehran-dignitaries>)

⁴⁵ Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, X, July 5, 2026. (https://x.com/Iran_GOV/status/2073654874290442292)

The SRBIJA Act rightfully notes that the United States cannot continue participating in the U.S.-Serbia Strategic Dialogue if Belgrade refuses to address its relations with U.S. adversaries and issues related to the rule of law, corruption, and free and fair elections. Serbia cannot expect the full benefits of a strategic partnership with Washington while simultaneously deepening security and strategic ties with U.S. adversaries.

In this respect, the defining feature of the American offer should be the standards attached to it. Russian and Chinese investment in Serbia has flowed through corrupt institutions; the U.S. offer should be its opposite — an open and effective regulatory system that genuinely benefits local communities.